

-COLLEGE OF PUGET SOUND-

-THE NOVELIST AND HIS INFLUENCE ON POLITICS AND REFORM-

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Every kind of literature which has come to have good form has had its beginning. The world has never known a time when stories were not told and it was this primitive way of relating experiences and history that finally developed into our widely read novel.

But it gained its popularity only thru a struggle for recognition. It is only of late that the novel has been able to claim equality with the epic, lyric and dramatic forms of literature.

In ancient times a writer who gave his message in common prose could not hope to be noticed. It must be in verse in order to have the accustomed dignity. Even in later times we remember that no novelist was elected to the French Academy in the first two years of its existence nor would French critics condescend even to discuss the novel.

We may say then that the novel had its appropriate source among the unlearned and it was not until the eighteenth century that it began to attract naturally endowed authors such as Richardson, Defoe, Fielding and others of like genius.

From that time until now the novel has been developing. Sometimes it is true it was misused but always some high-minded author has restored its dignity until it has become one of our favorite forms of literature today.

The kind of novel that is claiming most attention at the present time is the novel of Politics and Reform.

A study of our political novels reveals that they have a goal to reach and are striving to point out the flaws in our system of politics as well as to give some remedy for them.

The novel which deals with politics and reform might be called a novel of purpose, a type which according to Charles F. Horne "seeks to reach an audience and sets out to convince the reader of some doctrine or some improvement to be accepted and established."



George Eliot said, "The true function of a novelist with a purpose is the arousing of nobler emotions that make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of some special measures concerning which the artistic mind however strongly moved by social sympathy is not the best judge."

In other words our novel has become a great reformer and who can tell what its influence may yet be upon the political and reform questions of the great nations?

Few great men in public life can come in contact with the great mass of people which the novel reaches. "Coningsby" is said to have been more effective than one-hundred speeches would have been.

This is especially true in our modern day of libraries when books are accessible to almost every person and when even the great majority of laboring men are able to read.

By experimenting with political subjects novelists are awakening to the possibilities of politics as a figure for fiction. No other phase of activity makes a more popular appeal to the masses since a great majority of the world's people is dependent on politics or some opportunity resulting from political influences. No other occupation exerts such influence on business nor is responsible for the distribution of so much money. It touches society at every point.

George Gissing in his investigation of the fiction underlying modern politics says that the people will not study sociology and its problems. We must bring it to them thru the novel. "The novelist turns theories into people and problems into events and brings them home." Its function is to formulate the feelings of the people, to show where hard laws oppress and how they can be modified and to spread the knowledge of their fellow-men to all classes and foster sympathies between them.

It is for the politician to design actual schemes but for the novelist to set these currents in motion among the people. Writers are becoming more aware of this all the time and today almost every grievance of the toilers has its special pleader in fiction.



It is said that the average Englishman prefers the novels which he reads to contain some politics. (1) When people read political novels the author accomplishes his end for the reader is made to "swallow the doctrinal pill with the sugary coating of fiction."

The novelist lays bare the wretched lives of the helpless victims and the cruelty of the system which is crushing them. Even the newspapers are in the hands of capitalists who seldom reveal the real cause of crime and suffering.

But a novelist in order to make his production stand the test of time must reveal the real thing, show up the scandalous practices of the trusts or whatever it may be.

Political reforms are often thought to be due to some great leader but more often it is a novel which has impressed the need of reform on the leader. As one writer has put it, "When you throw up your hat for Jerome or Fokk or even Roosevelt remember that writers of fiction have helped to make possible what they have done." (2) The writers did the primary work and prepared the people for advanced lessons.

It is a fact also that the mere reading of a novel of politics or reform will interest a person to study farther into the matter and read other articles written on the same subject.

It has been in the past and will be in the future the chief aim of political and reform writers to disclose the inner meaning of social conditions, humanize the theories of radical reformers, and hasten progress by forecasting its next step and moulding towards it the minds of their generation.

It really is strange that more novels have not been written on this theme when we consider what might be made of it. However a view of the best that have been written reveals what the influence of the novel has been in England and the United States and what its possibilities are for the future.

- (1) Living Age- 1906
- (2) Critic-Fiction and Reform



The English novel arose about the middle of the eighteenth century and even as early as this Fielding says that he realized its value as a political force and showed that it could be made to express vividly the social and political abuses of the time.

In the preface of his "Amelia" he says that he wrote this book to promote the cause of virtue and expose some of the most glaring evils which then infested the country.

During the eighteenth century little success was met with by novelists on the subject of politics and reform. But the crude works of fiction written by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Condorcet put before the people speculations which they would otherwise not have had the desire or capacity to study out.

At the time of the French revolution the novel became very popular as a means of portraying wild speculations on politics, religion and education. But as yet no great novelist had come to the front to impress upon his readers the deeper meaning of unrest and social upheaval.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the English novel began to portray political and reform movements to any marked degree. Then it changed from a novel of manners to one reflecting every big political crisis.

During the Victorian era the novel became a great reformer. We may almost call Dickens, the greatest novelist of this age, a reform writer for his cause was always with the people and we see distinctly in his works a desire to show up the social deficiencies of his day.

His "Tale of Two Cities", for example, although a historical novel, pictures plainly the conditions of England and France at the time of the French Revolution.

Dickens also wrote "Oliver Twist" a plea for better schools in England.

He was one of the best public servants England ever had. He pleaded for the abolition of debtor's prisons, he wrote against the evils of parochial and private school systems, he advocated a reform of legal procedure, he headed the reaction against the policy of laissez faire and led the way for social legislation and reconstruction. He was the spokesman of the masses. He wrote for them and lived by their praises.



Next in historical line comes Charles Reade, a man whose influence on the social movements of his time is said to have been more direct and powerful than that of any of his contemporaries in fiction save Dickens. (1)

He wrote against the conditions in the prisons, asylums and trade unions of his day. In "Hard Cash" he exposed the danger to the community of sanctioning private lunatic asylums. In "Put Yourself in His Place" he exposed the terrible practices of the trade unions and in "It's Never too Late to Mend" we find him railing against the unsanitary and cruel conditions of the prisons.

Charles Kingsley wrote on political subjects because he could not help himself. He lived at a time when the social system of England had become the subject of alarm and debate.

There was a general feeling of uneasiness and a strong suspicion of governmental affairs. As Mr. Dawson said of him, "He was the product of circumstances, the interpreter of tendencies, the voice of a movement."

That movement was Chartism and is in itself a striking illustration of the political force of novels. It was the subject of Kingsley's two most influential novels.

He wrote "Yeast" while still boiling over the Chartist meeting of 1848. It is in this book that he brings the world face to face with the poor and disinherited. A thrilling note of humanitarianism dominates the whole book as the author rages against the mean and brutal conditions.

To say that this book was influential is putting it mildly for it raised a storm of indignant protest from churchmen as well as laymen, for they realized how great a factor it would be. In fact the opposition was so great that no publisher dared to put it out in book form until 1851.

The year before this Kingsley had written "Alton Locke", a story as real in its purpose as "Yeast." He says concerning it "It has revealed itself to me so rapidly and methodically that I feel it comes down from above."

(1) Dawson-makers of English Fiction p.164



At any rate we find Kingsley at his best in this book. The questions discussed in it go to the very root of the social problem. In fact the story almost becomes too much complicated by the author's attempt to picture labor conditions and sweat shops as he knows them.

George Meredith is also considered a political novelist, at least because of his "Beauchamp's Career." This is not a foresight into the future as was Kingsley's novels but a reflection after the event. It will claim attention for its recreation of the political atmosphere of two generations ago.

It shows France still the hereditary enemy of England and the terrors of the French invasion a real thing. It gives the military situation and the appalling condition of the English government.

Although he was not as successful as some, yet it was the desire of Meredith's heart to be known as a reform novelist. He says in answer to a private letter from an author of an article in the Harvard Monthly "When at the conclusion of your article on my works you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come about, will be to some extent due to me, you hand me the flowering wreath I covet. For I think that all right use of life and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us.

Of all English political writers Benjamin Disraeli is probably the most prominent. Nearly all his works are on political subjects. His "Popanilla" is a satire on the English constitution and Lewis Melville has said of it "His skits on the constitution, on government by party, on political economy, on the commercial system, on self-made millionaires and on the colonial system make amusing reading as well as providing food for reflection."

His "Ixion in Heaven" is a social satire in which he represents the ruling class as the great gods. The Tories and Whigs are giants and gods, the Iron Duke is Encleladus and Sir Robert Peel is Hypernion. He succeeds in working these characters into a pleasing little novel.



But the reputation of Disraeli as a writer was not made until he produced his "Coningsby". The plot of this book is only a thread around which the author wove his political and social views. As he said "he was endeavoring to picture something of that development of the new, better mind of England and to scatter some suggestions that may tend to elevate the tone of public life and ascertain the true character of political parties; to present the views of the young England party; to remove the church, in so far as concerned purely spiritual matters, from parliamentary dictation; to decentralize authority to local bodies and to improve the conditions of the laboring classes."

Although Coningsby is his most important political novel, all of Disraeli's books deal with political and social situations. He portrays to his readers the lives of great patrician families, whose genealogy is the history of England. He describes society in all of its phases at a time when one required a title, a million, or was himself a genius in order to enter into politics.

He placed his scenes in political society and made his stories illustrate the history of his time. He interpreted events to further the interests of his party. "He introduced the novelist's imagination into his statesmanship and the statesman's forethought into his novel."

His works will always be referred to for information as to the political and social world of his day.

Two English women writers are worthy of comment for their interest in politics and reform. Both wrote about the Chartist movement and both used their pens to improve the conditions of the laborers. Mrs. Gaskell treated these questions as a Christian woman, and George Eliot as a social philosopher.

No single one of their books can be said to be a political or reform novel but there is a strain of helpfulness thru all their works.



During the cotton panic of 1862 Mrs. Gaskell was the guide of the Manchester Ladies' Committee. (1) At another time she organized a cheap but pure milk supply for the poor and she was always interested in finding employment for the worthy of this class.

George Eliot will always be thought of as a reformer because of her determined purpose in writing.

Among the lesser English writers who have used this theme are Bulmer, who has written "The Caxtons" and "My Novel" both of which deal with political rivalry; Samuel Warren, who gives a vivid picture in his "Ten Thousand a Year" of a contested election with the details of polling and bribing, showing what political prejudice can do when it runs riot; and Mrs. Humphrey Ward who has displayed her intimacy with Parliament by dealing with social and labor questions and the distribution of wealth.

So much for the influence of English novelists. It remains yet to see what novelists the United States has reared to influence her politics and reforms.

These are many in number and although their works have had no chance to stand the test of time yet the fact remains that they have been of influence.

Take for example the excitement caused when "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was circulated thru-out the country. Who can say but that this book was one of the greatest factors in the settlement of the slavery question?

See the effect of Upton Sinclair's "Jungle". The newspapers and magazines contained much about the conditions in Chicago but not until the novel came out was any action taken. Then the people were shown the real conditions and they raised an outcry for better and more sanitary conditions in the stock-yards. This book alone created legislation and changed the working conditions of thousands of men and women.

Jack London says of this novel that it is "The Uncle Tom's Cabin of wage slavery" and classes it with Charles Reade's reform stories.

(1) Bookman 34:160



True there was opposition to it because of its sensationalism. But it was what the people needed to awaken them to the existing conditions and arouse them to action.

Mrs. Harris, a southern writer says that "buzzard geniuses are necessary to show the decayed places in the world." Sinclair was a genius of this kind and we believe that he was justified in laying the worst before the people in big cold print.

A New Haven clergyman says that the man who can read "The Jungle" without being stirred to the depths of his being may know that judgment has been passed on him.

Winston Churchill is one of our foremost writers and politics is his favorite theme. In "Coniston" he exposes the "Boss" system as it worked in a young district during Grant's Presidency. "Mr. Crew's Career" is an indictment of American business politics and is dedicated to those engaged in a struggle for purer politics.

Frances Burnett has written "Thru One Administration" to show the political corruption at Washington. In it she pictures a politician of the worst type and shows his bad influence.

Clarence King has given us a novel, well-named and emphatic to the utmost degree. "Democracy" is a true national work of fiction. Diplomats from various nations and Americans from all the states are made to go in and out of Congress making a likely but serious plot.

The book is most satirical. Take a single paragraph for instance describing politics at its worst. It runs thus: "This is the moment when the two whited sepulchers at either end of the avenue reek with the thick atmosphere of bargain and sale. The old is going, the new is coming. Wealth, office, and power are at auction. Who bids highest? Who hates with the most venom? Who has done the dirtiest, the meanest, the darkest and the most political work? He shall have his reward."



Another political story that has arisen to the dignity of a novel is Mr. Ford's "Honorable Peter Herling". The author of this book is unprejudiced in showing the municipal politician as a man. Mr. Ford is something more than a theorist. He is an earnest political reformer. Ex-Mayor Gilroy is said to have read Peter Sterling on an ocean voyage and was so impressed with it that he pointed out the political abuses to his friends. (1)

New York politics has received no little attention in fiction. Matthew Breen has written "Thirty Years in New York Politics", which in Mr. Maurice's estimate, has material in it that might be made to surpass Balzac's "Scenes from Political Life."

"Shacklett", by Walter Barr, shows how a man may rise from among the poor and corrupt of New York City. Mr. Barr's intention is to show that it is not always political ambition that dominates.

A similar novel concerning the good politician is "J. Delvin, Boss" by F. C. Williams. It shows how politicians may rise thru personal truthfulness, friendship and a firm will.

"The Man of the Hour" by Octave Thanet, describes the errors and dangers of socialism.

"The Memoirs of an American Citizen" by Robert Herrick tells how a man worked his way from jail up to the United States senate by bribing, cheating, gambling and buying offices.

Frank Norris brought the nations to a realization of the graft and juggling it was sustaining when he wrote "The Octopus", a California story showing the brutal and selfish struggle of the capitalists against the community. "The Pit" is a similar narrative of a deal in the Chicago wheat pit. This shows the game of speculation that controls the production and distribution of our food.

Brand Whitlock wrote "The 13th District" and "The Turn of the Balance" with a determination to expose the legal and other delinquencies of the American social system. In these novels he shows the unjust treatment of criminals and victims of legal injustice.

(1) Bkm 14:720-Arthur Maurice on Politician as literary material.



"The Kentuckians" by John R. Fox portrays a political feud between two rivals in Kentucky.

Jack London's "Iron Heel" was written against the trust systems.

"The Gentleman from Indiana" by Booth Tarkington has for its basis the warfare of a young newspaper man against a gang of political scoundrels.

Ellen Glasgow has taken a political theme for her "Voice of the People". Her hero is a poor Virginian boy with political ambitions who rises thru difficulties to a high position in his state.

Many other novels have been written on labor questions, slum conditions and immoral politics and while their influence has been great locally and at the time, it has not effected the nation to any marked degree.

The future for the novelists is bright, for they have begun to turn their minds to the settlement of our burning social questions. We realize that there are many to be settled and therefore the place of the novelist will be the more prominent. As one writer has put it, "Those who dabble in ink wade deep into human nature and apart from all else every good novel indirectly teaches humanity, humility and a deeper understanding of the heart."